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ABSTRACT

Until recently, the conventional wisdom about the conjunction of peer tutoring and writing in the disciplines was that a tutor unfamiliar with subject matter actually operated at an advantage. In spite of some of the theoretical advantages of ignorance, recent research suggests that it is difficult to ask probing questions and make useful suggestions about text that deals with unfamiliar material. Writing tutors must be comfortable in the role of beginner, in which they will be cast repeatedly as they confront new assignments and subjects. This role requires what developmental psychologist William Perry calls "advanced expertise in groping." To encourage the development of this expertise in groping, activities have been woven into each component of a course in tutor training. The three components of the course are reading, writing, and role-playing. Connections between a discipline's preferred style and its goals and priorities are explored. The course makes students aware of what it is like to be beginners by introducing them to composition theory, thus making them into beginners. (Contains five references.) (CR)

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ED 414 590

"Advanced Expertise in Groping": Training Tutors Who Don't Have to Know It All

Toni-Lee Capossela

As numerous articles and training guidelines point out, peer tutors must resist both the urge to become surrogate teachers and the mantle of expertise implicit in the term "tutor." Most tutors are happy to abdicate this vertical relationship, relieved that they needn't pretend to be grammar gurus or infallible generators of deathless prose. But the student writers who make up a writing center's core clientele are frequently disappointed by this denial of expertise, because expert advice is precisely what they are seeking.

Such expectations are especially problematic in assignments originating in the disciplines, particularly upper-level courses for majors. Writing tutors, instead of knowing more than students who come for help with these assignments, know less (possibly nothing at all) about the course material, and little about the writing conventions of the discipline.

This aspect of peer consulting is becoming more crucial as growing numbers of colleges abandon the mandatory first- year writing course. In some situations, this course is eliminated, re-defined as a remedial course, or replaced by writing-intensive courses in the disciplines; in other cases it is abbreviated, with the understanding that writing instruction will continue via upper-level courses in each student's area of concentration. An important result of these permutations is that writing tutors are being asked to read and respond to a growing number of assignments originating from sources other than first-year writing courses.

Until recently, the conventional wisdom about the conjunction of peer tutoring and writing in the disciplines was that a tutor unfamiliar with subject matter actually operated at an advantage. There is a certain logic to this point of view.

First, the argument goes, when a tutor is unfamiliar with the subject, ownership of the paper remains firmly where it belongs: with the writer. It is virtually impossible to appropriate a text concerning a subject one knows nothing about.

Second, working with a reader who knows less about the subject than the writer normalizes academic writing. If the natural impetus to writing is the desire to convey ideas, information, or attitudes to a reader interested in acquiring them, then the typical student-to- teacher essay is an unnatural act, involving a writer who has little hope of providing his reader with something she does not already know. A peer tutor unfamiliar with the subject temporarily reverses this unnatural situation: for the moment, at least, the writer knows more than the reader.

Third, unfamiliarity with the subject is especially helpful when responding to a poorly organized or elliptical draft. An informed tutor attempting to read supportively may unwittingly supply connections and interpretations the text itself lacks. But an uninformed tutor can work only with what the text already contains, and will have to request transitions that are missing or question organization that is fuzzy.

Fourth, faculty wishing to gauge students' comprehension of the discipline's specialized language may ask them to write for a reader unfamiliar with the course. Obviously, an uninformed peer tutor represents this target audience.

In spite of the theoretical advantages of ignorance, however, research such as that conducted by Sue Dinitz and Jean Kiedaisch of the University of Vermont, and articles

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such as Michael A. Pemberton's "Rethinking the WAC/Writing Center Connection" suggest that for a peer tutor responding to writing in the disciplines, ignorance is not bliss. These authors conclude that it is difficult to ask probing questions and make useful suggestions about a text dealing with unfamiliar material.

It is unarguable that peer tutors, no matter how eager and well-trained, cannot master all areas of undergraduate study. Majors learn about the writing demands of their discipline by taking many courses, not just one; and much of it they learn tacitly--a type of education which is effective but extremely time-consuming. This thorough immersion cannot be duplicated in a training course, even one with generous parameters. For instance, the 3-credit honors practicum course that I teach lasts for the entire semester: students have 14 weeks to read composition theory, explore their own writing processes, and apprentice and role- play with experienced tutors. But they do not have time to master the nuances of every sub-genre of academic writing. I have reached an uneasy truce with this fact by thinking long and hard about what a training course can and cannot do.

Students reasonably expect a training course to make them competent and confident practitioners in the activity for which they are training. Such competence constitutes an easily recognized type of expertise. But writing tutors must also become comfortable with the role of beginner, in which they will be cast repeatedly as they confront new assignments and subjects. It seems to me that this role requires precisely what developmental psychologist William Perry calls "advanced expertise in groping." Perry identifies this stance with the most mature level of cognitive development, in which the knower realizes that all understanding is tentative , and that new experiences may cast doubt on previous areas of certainty, turning one into a beginner again. To encourage the development of expertise in groping, I have woven into each component of the training course a strand of activities which require that students become neophytes and reflect on this role. The three components of the course are reading, writing, and role-playing.

In the most general terms, the course makes students aware of what it is like to be beginners by introducing them to the subject of composition theory and thus turning them into beginners. For each class meeting, students read not only a chapter from Meyers and Smith's The Practical Tutor, but also a text representing one of the basic approaches to composition theory. Our readings this semester include Kenneth Bruffee's "Collaborative Learning and 'The Conversation of Mankind,'" Peter Elbow's chapter on the loop writing process, Linda Flower and John R. Hayes' "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem," Nancy Sommers' "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Writers," Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch's "On Students' Right to Their Own Texts," Janet Emig's case study of Lynn in The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders, Mina Shaughnessy's introduction to Errors and Expectations, and Glenda Hull's "Acts of Wonderment."

Because these articles were written by and for writing teachers, student readers must deal with unfamiliar vocabulary , modes of organization, forms of evidence, and assumptions about background information. This aspect of the course mirrors the sense of strangeness which occurs in the writing center when dealing with a paper about an unfamiliar a topic . Class discussion of the readings centers around areas of difficulty, how to deal with them, and what kinds of critique can occur in the absence of total

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comprehension. We also talk about the conventions that can be extrapolated from the readings and how they are deduced.

Analyzing these challenging readings neither discourages students nor turns them into "midget teachers." Rather, it gives them a theoretical framework on which to hang their experience as writers and tutors. It also models and demystifies the neophyte status which is part and parcel of their work as tutors. Finally, it shows them what kinds of questions to ask when they discover gaps in their knowledge.

The writing as well as the reading of the course encourages reflection about what it is like to be a beginner. Students write something for each class; most of the writing tasks require formats other than the traditional academic essay. For instance, I ask students to imagine themselves advisors for an anthology aimed at peer tutors, and to recommend whether to include a particular essay in the anthology. Another time, they assume the identity of Lynn and write a letter to Emig responding to her exhaustive case study of Lynn's composing processes. For another writing task, students select an assignment sent to the Writing Center by a faculty member, then compose a dialogue based on the problems a student might confront in attempting to meet the professor's specifications.

My aim in creating such assignments is to devise tasks for which these accomplished writers, to borrow the terminology of Flower and Hayes, do not possess a "stored problem representation." Because this is new terrain, they must think carefully about tone, context, format, style, and register. In other words, they must proceed slowly and deliberately through the kind of rhetorical analysis that becomes reflex after repeated experience with a genre. Clearly this is both a foreshadowing of, and valuable practice for, the steps they will go through when they work with assignments in areas they know little about.

When we discuss their written responses to these assignments, we talk, of course, about the quality of their work, but we also examine the choices they made and the questions they asked themselves when experimenting with an unfamiliar genre. Then we consider how those strategies might be used to help a fellow student wrestling with a new kind of writing.

The third strand of the course--role-playing with an experienced tutor--also helps trainees operate comfortably when they lack crucial information. I ask supervising tutors to request feedback on their own work in progress as often as possible. This is a dream situation, since it is authentic on so many levels: the actual writer is presenting an actual reader with his or her actual text, and the writer is more knowledgeable than the reader about the material. But lacking this ideal scenario, I provide a draft which illustates the aspect of tutoring we are currently exploring in class, and I prep eacj supervising tutor with background material the actual writer would possess. For instance, one role-playing draft attempts to apply Paulo Freire's banking concept of education to a personal experience. Along with the draft, I give supervising tutors a summary of Freire's essay. Since the trainee is not familiar with the Freire essay, she will have to figure out what questions to ask so that the session does not proceed in a vacuum.

Other aspects of the course promote conventional expertise, building upon the information students do possess about writing in the disciplines. In recruiting students for the course, I rely on recommendations by faculty from all departments, so the class possesses a fairly broad knowledge base about different kinds of academic writing. We

routinely analyze assignments from a wide range of faculty members, and develop check-lists for evaluating drafts written in response to them. We recently began assembling an anthology of guidelines on writing in the disciplines; so far, faculty have provided material on economics, music, the visual arts, film, the natural sciences, philosophy, health care, and business.

We spend two weeks of the semester on explicit discussion of writing in the disciplines. To prevent differences from appearing whimsical or arbitrary, we explore the connections between a discipline's preferred style and its goals and priorities. For instance, the passive voice, with its emphasis on the object rather than the performer of an action, is perfect for scientific writing, where what happens is more important than who makes it happen. Indeed, a scientific experiment is deemed successful when the results are the same, regardless of who performs it. On the other hand, because it deflects attention from the performer of an action, the passive voice is not useful in a discipline like political science or history, where agency and responsibility are prime objects of analysis.

As fascinating as these discussions are, they provide no more than a nodding acquaintance with writing in the disciplines. Every semester, I emerge from this two- week unit more convinced than ever that the best way to prepare tutors to work constructively with the rich array of writing being assigned across my campus is to help them become confident, relaxed beginners. This semester, I decided to test my students' "advanced expertise in groping" by exposing them to another new genre: the professional conference paper. I gave them a working draft of this paper. It had grinding gears instead of smooth transitions, inadequate support of several key points,some impossibly convoluted sentences, and patches of purple prose. It also lacked an ending. I sketched in the circumtances under which the paper would be presented, asked for particular kinds of feedback, and invited other suggestions for improvement.

The students responded incisively and helpfully, not because they drew on extensive experience with this genre, but because they thought carefully about this new writing situation. Some excellent suggestions arose from the fact that the paper would be delivered orally. For instance, it was recommended that I label the main points of my argument more clearly, supply more transitions, and conclude with a summary, since the audience would need help keeping track of such things in the absence of a printed text. Several students read the paper aloud to see if it was easy to follow without a hard copy, and decided that some of the longer sentences, rather then being re-written, could be clarified through careful delivery.

Students qualified other suggestions by acknowledging that they were not members of the target audience. I had asked them where the paper dragged, and in answering this question, many realized that what they found tedious, such as the complete list of course readings, might be riveting to an audience of teachers and writing center directors. In pointing out unknown terms and cryptic allusions, they noted that my listeners might be familiar with the material. In noting the lack of an immediate topic statement, they wondered whether conference-goers would know from extra-textual material what topic I would be discussing.

Their healthy deference to a new genre, however, did not prevent students from providing a tough-minded evaluation of my draft and useful suggestions for improving it.

Asked which sentences and phrases were awkward or unwieldy ("clunky" was actually the word I used), they headed with perfect pitch to the ones I'd re-written a score of times with little success. Asked to analyze the organization, about a quarter of the class glossed the draft one paragraph at a time, and concluded that transitions were rather thin on the ground. Asked where they wanted to hear more, several noted that the title phrase from Perry had not been fully explained.

Asked what they expected in the yet-to-be-supplied conclusion, most said they wanted proof that my training system operated in the way I claimed it did, preparing tutors to work constructively with topics and writing situations they know little about. As one student put it, "I want to hear a success story."

I rest my case.

A Selective Reading List

Dinitz, Sue and Jean Kiedaisch. "Collaboration Writing Centers: Academic Dishonesty or Construction of Knowledge." Conference on College Composition and Communication. San Diego, CA, March 1993

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